

2020

Strategic Role of Religious Tourism in Recuperating the Indian Tourism Sector Post-COVID-19

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Recommended Citation

Manhas, Parikshat Singh Dr. and Balakrishnan Nair, Bipithlal (2020) "Strategic Role of Religious Tourism in Recuperating the Indian Tourism Sector Post-COVID-19," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 8: Iss. 7, Article 6.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol8/iss7/6>

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Cover Page Footnote

This research was conducted with the support of the 2020 Woosong University in-school academic research grant

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This study explores the role of religious tourism in revitalising the Indian tourism sector post-COVID-19, with a focus on domestic tourism. This study is guided by the interpretive paradigm and operationalised through Faulker's (2001) model of crisis management. Expert opinions and secondary data sources (newspaper articles, magazines and media reports) were used as the data sources; these were collected through purposive sampling techniques to obtain information-rich and context-specific samples. The results reveal that religious sites could play a substantial role in reviving the Indian tourism sector by promoting staycations and micro-holidays, and by reforming existing projects such as the Swadesh Darshan and the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD). The findings of this study suggest that collaboration with other prominent tourist attractions like Yoga, Wellness and Ayurveda, which have deep-seated relationships with Hinduism, could be a vital tool to activate the sector; these results are promising even at this stage of crisis for India. This study also identifies the major practical impediments such a plan would need to overcome, including physical distancing, crowding, festivals and ritual performance. Furthermore, this study offers practical insights into the potential pioneering roles of India's key religious sites, such as Venkateshwara Temple, Vaishno Devi Temple, Golden Temple, Ajmer Dargah Sharif, and Velankanni Church, to create initiatives to rebuild the religious tourism sector.

Key Words: staycations, micro-holidays, Faulker's model, Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD

Introduction

The outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has defined global events in 2020, and this unprecedented crisis has enforced global travel restrictions. International governments have implemented stay-at-home rules, and lockdown orders are exacerbating the world's biggest disruption since the Second World War. Worldwide travel restrictions have impacted more than 90% of the world's inhabitants, with widespread restrictions on large gatherings and social mobility (Gosling *et al.*, 2020). The tourism industry has been ground zero for economic impacts of the outbreak since the first quarter of 2020, and the devastation and economic stagnation have surpassed all prediction models. This has raised many concerns about the future of global tourism, including tourists' potential behavioural changes, resilience and

rebuilding, safety and security, hygiene issues, the future of international travel and the role of domestic tourism in resilience. Undoubtedly, this pandemic has transformed the entire world, creating a 'New Normal' for domestic and international travel. Thus, this is the critical time to develop strategies for recovery and rebuilding within the new atmosphere of uncertainty.

As Higgins-Desbiolles (2020:1) has noted:

the COVID-19 pandemic crisis may offer a rare and invaluable opportunity to rethink and reset tourism toward a better pathway for the future.

The tourism industry can recuperate and recreate itself as a vital segment of national economies and the broader sustainable development agenda. However, this paper argues that the responsible pathway to increased tourism cannot by itself provide adequate dynamism to enable such a restoration. Therefore, every tourist

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destination must work on its specific attractions within the framework of the *New Normal*. Toward this end, this study examines the religious tourism of India and its potential for recuperating the Indian tourism sector post-COVID-19. This research mainly focuses on domestic tourism as the predicted *quickest survivor*, or the projection that ‘domestic travel will recover first’ (Meir, 2020:1). Likewise, Brouder (2020:2) has emphasised that ‘tourism in the context of COVID-19 reveals how the local is a locus of change.’

In the context of Indian tourism, domestic religious tourism is a large part of the society. Religiousness is a cornerstone of Indian culture and is the foundation of community values and the specific practices of daily life. India, as the cradle of civilisation and mother of four major religions, has been one of the top religious tourism destinations in the world for decades. The ancient iconic religious sites in the country are booming markets for both international and domestic tourism. Domestic tourism is the backbone of Indian tourism, and interestingly 60% of domestic visits are indirectly or directly linked to religious tourism and pilgrimage (Shinde, 2014). Thus, at this juncture, religious tourism can be a strategic tool for India’s post-COVID-19 recovery. This study explores the role of religious tourism in revitalising the Indian tourism sector post-COVID-19, with a particular focus on domestic tourism.

Literature Review

Religious Tourism—The Indian Context

Religious tourism is a branch of tourism, and it is, in fact, the oldest form of tourism (Rogerson, 2019; Rinschede, 1992). The notion of religious tourism came into being almost with the creation of humanity. Since the commencement of history, human beings have travelled to different religious sites (Boris, 2015). Pilgrimage tourism has been ongoing since the origin of humanity, and the legal, social, cultural and economic implications have always been, and continue to be substantial (Tirosh-Samuels, 2018). Religious tourism is a kind of tourism which strongly influences tourists to attain religious inspiration (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018). Indian religious tourism is defined by various characteristics: the conviction of the national tourists, who believe in connection with divinity or sites of worship in line with

their religious philosophies; and international tourists, who may belong to many religions, provinces or nations (Terzidou *et al.*, 2018). For them, the destination and the associated spiritual rituals have a measure of uniqueness, a spiritual involvement, unlike their native regions, notwithstanding the similar moral values being conveyed (Smith, 2019).

Since ancient times India has enjoyed an era of spiritual inspiration which has been marked by the development of Indian sacred activities and the development of Hindu (and many other) religious activities, which serve to resolve the anxieties and strains of daily life (Kumar, 2019). India is the country of origin of four main religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism), and also includes followers of many other religions such as Islam and Christianity. Related to this, religious and spiritual tourism are a significant part of the tourism industry (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Davidson & Sahil, 2015). This industry is sometimes referred to as ‘Special Interest Tourism’, and is generally related to the followers of individual faiths who visit places considered to be holy sites (Ghimire, 2019). The term Religious tourism is extensively used in philosophy and practice to link with tour arrangements to religious sites. Religious tourism is perceived as a specific kind of tourism whose contributors are inspired either partially or entirely for spiritual reasons (Rinschede, 1992; Jaswal, 2014), insofar as this inspiration is associated with vacation making (Tomasi, 2002). Limited studies have inspected the financial significance of religious tourism, the extent of this market, significant market players and the market’s role in energising places for religious and spiritual tourism.

Religious tourism includes those travelling to form long-lasting relationships with others of a similar mind, and it improves such bonding and beliefs in a sophisticated way (Wang *et al.*, 2016). It has been defined as physical travel for finding truth and in search of enlightened answers to specific essential questions, philosophical questions such as the significance of life or even more precise questions such as the significance of the travelling individual’s life (Wilson *et al.*, 2013). Temples, mosques, gurudwaras, churches and other major religious centres, as socio-economic structures, are tangible assets in terms of travel arrangement and the workers they employ.

Religious Tourism and Contributions in India Pre-COVID-19

Tourism in a developing country like India is vital for the economy, and Indian tourism is growing rapidly (Dellink *et al.*, 2015). Religious tourism has been a successful catalyst for socio-economic growth, providing for the tastes of tourists an uninterrupted provision of service (Budha & Bahadur, 2018). The India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF) projected that the influence of the travel and tourism industry on the Indian economy would surge from INR 15.24 trillion or 9.4% of India's GDP in 2017, to INR 32.05 trillion in 2028. The total income from domestic tourist visits in 2017 was about INR 1.8 billion (up approximately 12% from over INR 1.6 billion (IBEF, 2020).

According to the statement of Mr K. J. Alphons, former Minister of State for Tourism in the Government of India, nearly 60% of Indian tourists in 2018 travelled for religious activities (Alphons, 2018). Further, according to the available figures from the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Government of India website, around 1854.93 million tourists travelled for domestic purposes in 2018 (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018). Thus, it can be concluded that approximately 1000 million domestic tourists travelled solely for religious purposes. Further, as per the data retrieved from the 2019 tourism statistics survey, around 60% of package tours were organised for pilgrimage purposes (Indian Tourism Statistics, 2019). This is a highly significant volume of religious tourists—also referred to as worshippers—who contribute a considerable amount of money to the local economies of these religious sites in particular and the Indian economy in general. Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEE) for tourism in India was 28.09 billion USD in 2018, and there was an estimated 6.8% increase in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2019). Religious tourism independently contributed 44.5% of the total export incomes of Indian tourism (Vijayanand, 2012). Since 2012, export incomes from religious tourism have been growing steadily.

In India, many religious sites such as Tirupati Balaji Temple generate employment opportunities (Hancock, 2019). Religious tourism has opened up numerous sources of earnings, and as a consequence, several

new businesses have emerged. Religious tourism has had a similar economic influence as other forms of tourism, such as job creation, population growth and the expansion of services and infrastructure (Lavkhin, 2003). Based on the trends of religious tourism in 2019, it was projected that the sector would continue to grow for the foreseeable future and that the share of religious tourism in the Indian economy would continue to be significant. Thus, religious tourism is considered one of the leading underutilised marketplaces for the domestic travel industry. The Indian government has realised the economic importance of religious tourism and has been continuously creating innovative practices to bolster this segment.

Before COVID-19, religious Indian destinations were already prone to crises (mainly natural disasters), although such disruptions were short-lived and overtaken by the resilience of pilgrims and tourists alike. After every disaster, it would appear that religious sites receive an overwhelming response from pilgrims who visit these sites with renewed enthusiasm. Chan *et al.* (2012) have identified that in a sample of African American low-income women after Hurricane Katrina, pre-disaster religiousness was connected with better post-disaster social resources, optimism and a sense of purpose. As far as Indian pilgrims are concerned, they have also shown great post-disaster emotional support and have returned to these sites with renewed vigour. The infamous tragedy at Kedarnath Dham in 2013 was a shock to the religious community, but, 110 days after the disaster, pilgrimage to the site reopened with the necessary precautions and safety standards in place. Travellers had to complete medical requirements and pass the safety check before proceeding for pilgrimage, and within a few years, the Yatra had surpassed pre-2013 visitor numbers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole of India has come to a standstill, and there has been no form of tourism undertaken in the country since the outbreak. The present COVID-19 pandemic is unique from any other in recent memory and is likely to endure into the anticipated future. Destructive occurrences such as world wars, 9/11, SARS, MERS or the 2008 financial crisis, all phased out with time, however with this pandemic the timelines are unclear. These previous crises caused damage to their physical and economic surroundings. Likewise,

COVID-19 has permanently transformed the world in every conceivable respect and has profoundly impacted all individuals and industries, including the global travel, tourism and hospitality industries (Chang *et al.*, 2020). This, of course, includes the Indian religious tourism market. The 9/11 catastrophe, a single-day event, caused over \$100 billion in damage to physical infrastructure and led to hundreds of thousands of people in many dozens of countries losing their jobs as the world headed into a sharpened recession (Karmakar, 2019); reflecting on this, the impact of COVID-19 can only be imagined at this moment.

COVID-19 Outbreak and Impact

There will be a devastating impact on the tourism industry, including religious tourism, as COVID-19 continues, and the economic, social and physical consequences will be enormous for both domestic and international tourism. The immediate impact has been significant and has caused enormous losses in economic growth and employment. A significant portion of tourism revenue in India comes from religious tourism; the ban on religious gatherings and the closing of all religious sites due to the outbreak have profoundly impacted Indian religious tourism. Hotel bookings and room reservations for pilgrimage sites declined across all destinations, with travellers deferring all plans (*The Economic Times*, 2020). The majority of hotels and travel agents face a considerable loss of income during this ongoing shutdown. Various states decided to close down all major religious tourism destinations, including Siddhivinayak Temple and Vaishno Devi, forcing travellers to change their plans and resulting in a steep decline in the business (Chopra, 2020). In India, the Ministry of Tourism has organised a series of webinars under the theme of Dekho Apna Desh (explore your nation) to showcase the various regions of India and their main USPs (Unique Selling Propositions) in terms of tourism (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2020).

According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, there was an 80% drop in bookings and overnight stays in January and February at pilgrimage sites. A meeting chaired by the Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) including high-level representatives from the public and

private sectors, as well as international organisations such as World Health Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, IATA, World Travel and Tourism Council, expressed grave concerns over the decline in religious tourism in India during the lockdown (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2020).

The long-term impact of this situation will depend on the duration of the global lockdown and the speed at which the industry can change to come in line with the new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Currently, according to UNWTO estimates, 100 to 120 million jobs are at immediate risk, with a staggering number of one million people losing their jobs every single day. The minimum global GDP loss is USD 2.63 trillion (3.1%) in 2020 alone. Hospitality Valuation Services (HVS) has projected that there will be a loss of USD 66 Billion to the Indian tourism sector. As far as branded hotels are concerned, there will be an economic decline of roughly 17% to 21% in 2020 alone.

Religious Tourism worldwide will be severely impacted, and market insights reveal that considerable time will be required to bring all forms of tourism, including religious tourism, back on track. The pandemic has profoundly impacted religious tourism in various ways, including the cancellation of worship services, the closure of all worship sites, and the cancellation of pilgrimages surrounding observances and festivals (Daniel, 2020). The majority of stakeholders dealing with religious tourism have begun to worship via live stream amidst the pandemic. Many issues and challenges have been created by the ban on religious tourism, such as loss of business to the local tourism stakeholders and effects on religious sentiments of the people. Many of the Hindu festivals were cancelled due to the pandemic, including Holi Navratri and Ram Navmi (Burke, 2020).

One of the significant issues with Indian religious sites is overcrowding and crowd management. Going forward, if there is to be any attempt to allow these sites to reopen, the various boards and institutions managing these sites will have to create and enforce proper guidelines for crowd management - without damaging or diminishing the sentiments and emotions of the worshippers. They will have to ensure that proper cleaning and sanitisation of the religious sites is performed, as per official guidelines.

It will be a significant challenge for the management of religious sites to ensure that religious workers at places of worship will follow the criteria for physical distancing and temperature testing and to guarantee that other COVID-19 protocols followed correctly. After the eradication (or at least mitigation) of COVID-19, it may take time for religious travellers to resume visiting religious sites in significant numbers. Worshippers obviously will have to adhere to the guidelines and SOPs as notified from time to time. It is hoped that by the end of 2020, or by early 2021, the demand for religious tourism amongst domestic travellers will begin to rise.

Crisis & disaster Management Frameworks in Tourism

There are many frameworks for contingency planning, and several scholars propose different versions. Faulkner’s model (2001), which is relevant to the tourism and hospitality industries, is among the most popular, and thus, is adopted in this study (see Figure 1). Faulkner’s model has six stages: pre-event, depersonalisation disorder, disaster, intermediate, long-term (recovery) and resolution. Another framework, developed by Fink

(2004) has four phases: the prodromal period, the acute period, the recurrent stage, and the recovery stage.

Even though these models were primarily developed in the context of natural disasters and crisis management in tourism, they can also found to be useful for a crisis like a pandemic. As per Faulkner disaster means:

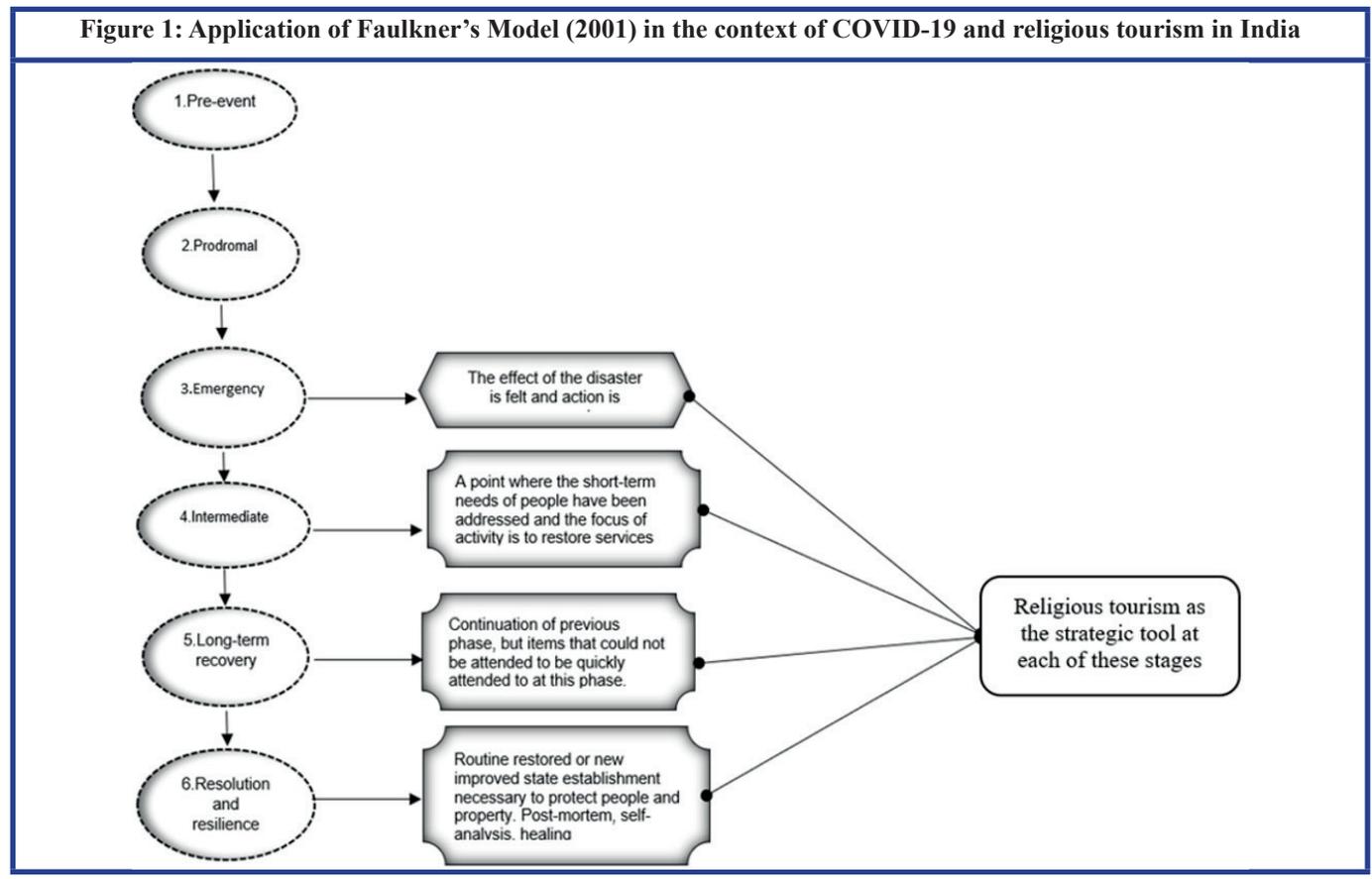
where a sector...is confronted with sudden, unpredictable catastrophic changes over which it has little control (2001: 136).

A proactive risk management strategy for resolving a crisis is most effective. A model by Ritchie (2004) identifies three main stages in efficiently managing these incidents: mitigation and preparation, execution, and evaluation and input. Each stage can include strategic leadership tasks and activities. Crisis and disaster management and planning; implementation of policies; and response, assessment and reviews are established.

The first stage includes environmental screening; analysis of problems and scenario preparation; situational forecasting, danger mitigation and testing and analysis of problems; and disaster preparedness.

The policy execution process consists of accelerated

Figure 1: Application of Faulkner’s Model (2001) in the context of COVID-19 and religious tourism in India



plan assessment and decision-making; incident/disaster impact or control; incident coordination and control; resource allocation; and awareness and cooperation with stakeholders.

The significant tasks at the final level are to address and return the destination or entity to the pre-crisis scenario; reinvestment and resourcing strategies; crisis / disaster as catalysts for change; and corporate development and input.

Ritchie (2004) found that companies must restructure their organisational framework in order to handle crises quickly and effectively; they must, therefore, collaborate with a wide variety of partners, both internally and externally.

Crisis management following a catastrophe can lead to new circumstances with wider social and cultural repercussions. Whenever the crisis begins and occurs, society can embrace the resultant transformation, with adaptation taking effect as the group recovers from the catastrophe and develops various forms of coping (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). There could be a variety of reasons that affect society as it is grappling with the circumstance. These may include the relevant socio-cultural, psychographic, institutional, political and resource-level characteristics of the community; the event-related aspects that may be composed of factors precipitating the cause or causes of the incident; and the factors of impact (such as the number of fatalities or damage to property) (Paraskevas & Quek, 2019; Faulkner, 2001).

Research Design

This is an exploratory study to understand the potential role of religious tourism in reviving the tourism sector of India post-COVID-19. Therefore, the study was guided by the principles of the interpretive paradigm proposed by Lincoln and Guba (2011) to capture the inter-subjective ontological positions.

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of a specific event, rather than a surface description of a large sample of the population. The goal is to provide a clear description of the structure, order and specific trends contained in a community of participants and helps to generate context-specific findings (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). Data collection for this study was conducted

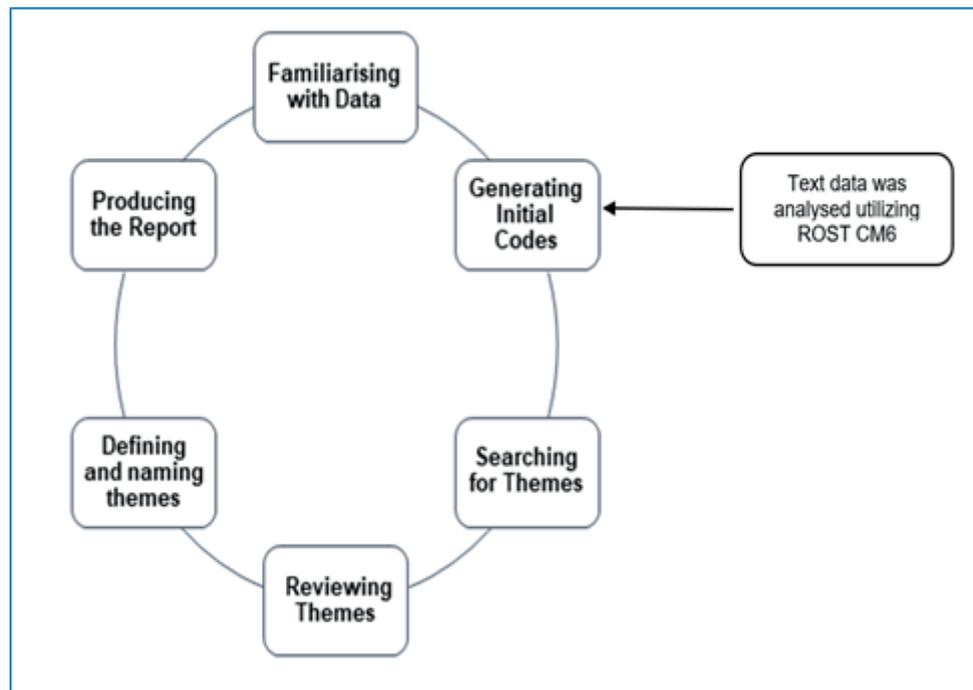
between February and May 2020, within the framework of Faulkner's (2001) disaster management model, which is one of the most adaptable models for the tourism industry. This model analyses various stages of a crisis, but his study mainly focused on the last four stages: the emergency stage, intermediate stage, recovery stage and resolution stage. To do this, it was vital to consider the points of uncertainty around the pandemic, especially for India as the country is still in the emergency stage.

Both primary and secondary data sources were incorporated into this study. Expert opinions (coded as EP) collected through interviews, webinars, and forums were the main primary data. At this juncture of COVID-19, experts views are substantial for providing insight into the future of religious tourism as a valuable source for recovery. Additionally, information was gathered from newspaper articles, magazines and social media sites (coded as DA). Due to this unprecedented crisis, these types of secondary resources are believed to shed light on the current situation. Purposive sampling was utilised to select study samples. This was to ensure the quality and authenticity of the data collected. This is vital since this study incorporated a considerable number of secondary resources—such as newspaper articles—to develop a contextual understanding. However, even though these are published, they are not peer-reviewed as per general academic standards. Thus, the analysis focused on purposive sampling was found to be a suitable technique. As per Patton (2015:2), with the purposive approach, samples are

selected to support and deepen qualitative analysis and interpretation of patterns and themes. This is a form of emergent sampling at the analysis stage.

Data analysis was conducted in a multistage process, see Figure 2 (Bhandari, 2019; Prayag & Ryan, 2011). Firstly, an analysis was performed utilising text frequency analysis to generate initial codes from 120 pieces of secondary data by establishing the presence and frequency of textual concepts (Flick, 2014). The main trends were established at this point. Text data were analysed utilising ROST CM6 (Cong *et al.*, 2014). Its primary purpose is to help conduct Weibo (micro-blog) analysis, approximate word frequency metrics and applying the concept, among other functions. Before

Figure 2: Multistage Data Analysis Process



Source: Authors

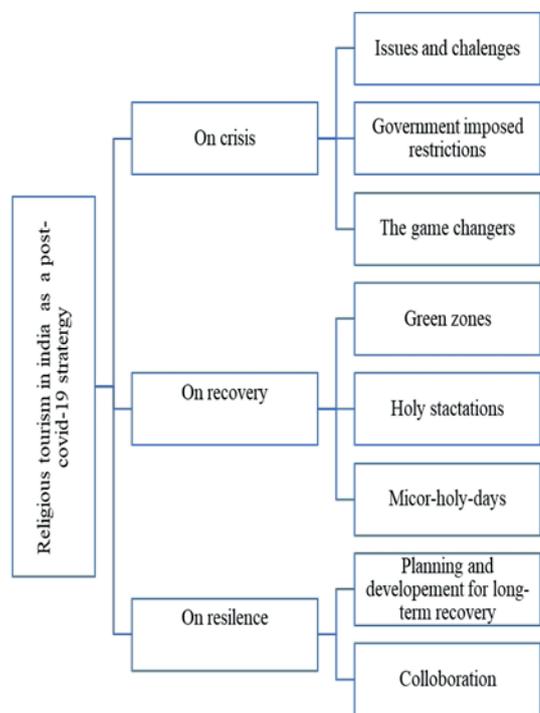
conducting analyses, some preliminary preparation was required such as the removal of non-contributing words like ‘a,’ ‘I,’ ‘or,’ and ‘the;’ standardising verb forms (all changed to present tense); and grouping for Grouping terms (shrines to temple, photographs to photo and so on). Then, according to the codes, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was completed (Figure 3).

Braun & Clarke (2006:23) describe thematic analysis as

a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail.

The emergent themes that are recognised in this phase and the development of themes and thematic categories are useful ways to extract meaning from the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Barbour, 2014). The study is based on implicit meaning or the underlying concepts and assumptions in the narratives. The emerging trends were grouped and summarised under three sub-sections and these are each discussed in this paper’s Findings section.

Figure 3: Study Themes and Sub-Themes



Source: Authors

Findings & Discussion

Crisis Stage

At the crisis stage, the effects of the disaster are at their peak and action is necessary for the safety and security of all involved; therefore, 'tourism activities and the industry do not play an important role in the emergency phase' (Chan *et al.*, 2019: 9). However, religious activities, mass gatherings, and cults became culprits for the social spreading of COVID-19 in India, and this could be a real challenge for the sector to overcome. India's religious tourism is as an integral part of its social culture, and mass gatherings, crowds, rituals and festivals are the soul of worship and act as a main attraction for tourists. In this regard, religious activities have been noted as one of the potential coronavirus clusters in India, as paper NPA-10 (Code for- News Paper Article 10) indicated. Places of religious gathering such as temples, mosques and churches can be clusters for coronavirus transmission.

This is, and will continue to be, a real challenge for India's tourism sector. Safety concerns will transform the entire tourism industry, leading to what might be termed *the survival of the safest*. The safety of visitors will be a critical factor in the tactical or strategical planning for the reopening of the industry. This will also be the key to post-COVID-19 marketing. These trends indicate an irreversible change in religious practice, at least until the discovery of a vaccination against COVID-19.

The Virtual Religious World through Online Forums and Social Media

As a vast, densely populated country, India faces several challenges when compared to more sparsely populated religious destinations. Due to population intensity, the government has implemented a vigorous strategy to control the pandemic's spread, including lockdown, regional travel restrictions, and the worship place control act. Therefore, all across the nation, religious sites and devotees have transformed into virtual settings. As per EI-1 (code for Expert Interview 1), those who began their day with a temple visit now perform online darshan to begin their day. Most Uttar Pradesh temples are webcasting artis, darshans, and other rituals:

We are under complete lockdown, but we are trying to stay connected with devotees who keep

on calling us for performing pujas [daily rituals and offerings] inside the temples like before. We just tell them to wait for some more time. They can go online to our Facebook page where evening Arti [a ritual with lamps and lights to worship the deity] is webcast (NPA 124).

Social media like Facebook and Zoom platforms have been widely and globally deployed for religious activities. As per the claim of the Golden Temple in Punjab (one of India's most famous religious tourism destinations), millions of people are following the rituals online.

Scores of devotees listen to kirtan through online live streaming across the world (NPA, 124).

This is an interesting trend at this stage of the crisis, one which is keeping the sector alive for both domestic and international devotees. The portals of the Gangotri, Yamunotri, and Kedarnath shrines remained open for the 'Char Dham yatra, which continues for six months, attracts lakhs of pilgrims and tourists to the state from across the world' (NPA, 74).

Priests and local bodies at these sites reported that pilgrims are able to book digital prayer slots in these challenging times if they cannot arrive to the Char Dham shrines for pilgrimage; online and digital methods are some of today's newest and safest options. This is one of the most significant advantages for India as a leading tourism destination. The study recommends starting these kinds of activities from all frontline religious sites, including Venkateshwara Temple, Vaishno Devi Temple, Golden Temple, Ajmer Dargah Sharif and Velankanni Church, to create practical solutions for keeping the sector alive. These sites should use their resources (economic, social and technological) to maintain and even revitalise the religious tourism sector.

Recovery Stage

When the global disaster threat has settled and / or been resolved, the impacted destination(s) can shift from an emergency phase to an intermediate phase in which all appropriate stakeholders begin to supplement the short-term pre-rehabilitation recovery efforts with accelerated strategies and responses to specific circumstances. Short-term recovery involves tourism, which will return only once the country is restored to a certain extent (Chan *et*

al., 2019). India is still currently facing the pandemic, which is expected to have peaked by June 2020.

Boost Domestic Tourism

While the immediate focus is on domestic travel, selective international travel will be the next step as the health risks and pressures ease. As part of the so-called 'travel bubble' plans, some countries have looked towards opening international borders only with countries that have successfully limited the spread of the virus. Depending on the management of COVID-19, this may include some countries connecting with India. For India's religious tourism sector, this will be of high importance, however, in the interim, domestic tourism can directly or indirectly contribute to the religious tourism sector (Kunt, 2018; Michael & Knut, 2018; MoT, 2018). Therefore, domestic tourism activities are predicted to initially address the slump in up-and-coming markets. Thus, experts support domestic tourism as the cornerstone for the post-COVID-19 strategy for India by stating that

industry must put their immediate focus on domestic tourism (E7).

Some participants highlighted the diversity of religious sites and the size of the country as factors which will help domestic tourism and have

an advantage in improving the domestic tourism (E6).

However, tourists may be reluctant to take an active part in mass tourism and want to plan trips with a focus on enhanced encounters and vacations; a practice frequently referred to as 'solo tourism' (NP12). For religious tourism, this may be a potential challenge to overcome, since mass social gatherings are inherent to India's religious tourism. However, this is predicted to be a part of a 'New Normal.' As per one of this study's informants:

The sector will devise its own 'New Operational Plan' in light of the new global order. Professionals will research the current demand-supply trend, evolve and adjust by strengthening the health plan, obey SOPs, and become digitally robust. Domestic tourism is likely to begin first, in the initial post-lockdown process. The industry will also rely on domestic tourism rather than inbound or outbound (E4).

Furthermore, whether it is domestic or international tourism, the future of destination selection as informed by 'safety and hygiene' is a critical point for religious attractions. Experts recommend that it is essential to formulate SOPs for religious sites which consider visitor management, cleaning and hygiene practices, carrying capacity and ritual performances (E10). Governments all over the world are likely to put health protocols and SOPs in place for industries and for travellers to follow. If India overcomes the COVID-19 crisis relatively successfully, the country will emerge as a 'Safer and Healthier' world tourist destination. In times to come, the destination which can brand itself as a 'healthy-safe' destination will be a globally preferred destination for travel. Within India, there may also emerge 'safer regions and destinations.' Domestic travellers, as well as inbound travellers, will, therefore, prefer to visit such safe destinations during the initial period (NP 57).

In this regard, it is vital to include India's green zones (based on the intensity of the pandemic, the Government of India, divided the whole country into zones - Red, Orange and Green accordingly). In May 2020, 319 districts were under the green zone, according to the list shared by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. These districts and religious attractions must focus on post-COVID tourism marketing tactics. There are many famous religious sites still in green zones, such as Gwalior, Sanchi, and Chitrakoot. Highlighting these places through effective channels will create a decisive pull factor for religious tourists (E7).

Holy Staycations

COVID-19 changed life patterns for the entire world, especially the travel aspects, as the crisis has required a 'temporary deglobalisation' (Niewiadomski, 2020:1) which reflects strongly on tourism activities. As Brouder (2020) has suggested, this is a time for *staycations*, when a person or family stays at home and participants in recreational activities within easy reach of their place of residence and therefore does not require overnight stays. This could relate to India's domestic religious travels and pilgrimages as a matter of daily practice to help the local market and promote staycations. This will put an emphasis on the domestic market, and benefit less frequently visited religious destinations and support less crowded places.

Micro-Holidays

Micro-holidays are ‘a small-scale breaks designed to give you just that – a break’ (Lauran, 2020:1). As per Hall *et al.* (2020:8), micro-holidays are especially significant given the enormous reduction in flights as a result of COVID-19 as well as the impacts on specific travel modes, such as cruise ships. At the moment, over 90% of the world’s population live in countries with some level of international travel restrictions, and many of these countries also have some degree of restrictions on internal movement, including limited air travel and stay-at-home orders. Moreover, for some intercontinental tourism markets, the extent to which transit regions, such as significant aviation hubs, are open to tourists is extremely important for destination access. Travel restrictions and governmental insistence on COVID-19 preventive rules, considering the economic downturn, also affect tourism spending. Hence, as a short-term strategy, it is beneficial to promote micro-holidays, which typically involve minimal expenditure. This will keep the sector alive (E5). For Indians, micro-holidays are not a new concept but are instead a part of their routine. It is time to exploit all the favourable factors to rejuvenate the tourism sector. Due to the deep-rooted relationship between religiousness and Indian culture, sacred sites and attractions can act as a catalysing factor.

To sum up, at the recovery stage, religious tourism can do more compared to other niche modes of tourism. All factors which are currently highlighted as part of the recovery strategy (domestic tourism, staycations and micro-holidays) are directly or indirectly linked with the religious tourism aspects of India. As the country emerges from the pandemic, these features could be used to revitalise the tourism sector.

On Resolution

Resilience is uncertain for COVID-19; however, as a long-term strategy, many critical factors can contribute. Significant contributions will be from the governments for rebuilding the tourism sector. In this regard, religious tourism can utilise a variety of tools which already exist to reconstruct or reform and become a catalyst for improving the predicted slump in post-COVID-19 tourism.

Developed Trans(re)form Packages

There are two existing and promising religious tourism projects:

- 1) the Swadesh Darshan Scheme (SDS) and
- 2) the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD)

Firstly, SDS ‘promises to build infrastructure to develop 15 themed routes in India at different regional and national scales’ (Roy & Gretzel, 2020:2). For this scheme, the Buddhist Circuit, Krishna Circuit, Spiritual Circuit and Ramayana Circuit are predicted to have a substantial impact on the country’s tourism statistics. Considering the possible widespread impact of COVID-19 on tourism activities, SDS can be reformed to promote destinations through the cooperation of local bodies with a particular emphasis on green zone locations. Other versions of SDS also could help by adding less crowded, undiscovered, and potentially popular religious sites. Promotional activities will be essential for further development in the context of travel restrictions (both international and interstate).

Secondly, The Government of India has initiated a PRASAD scheme to define and establish sacred visitor sites focused on the concepts of high tourism returns, profitability and sustainability to improve the experience of religious tourism. Under this scheme 13 cities: Ajmer, Amritsar, Amravati, Dwarka, Gaya, Kamakhya, Kancheepuram, Kedarnath, Mathura, Patna, Puri, Varanasi and Velankanni have been identified (Mishra & Ojha, 2016:108). Sarode & Shah (2020) suggest that the PRASAD scheme, with the collaboration of the North-East India project, will enhance religious tourism’s potential. This is relevant in the context of a pandemic since Northeast regions are COVID-free as compared to other regions.

Collaboration

Indian culture is gifted with unique cultural exports such as Yoga, Ayurveda, spirituality and indigenous artforms (Upadhyay, 2020). All of these are deep-seated aspects of the country’s religiousness and religious culture. Moreover, it is essential to counteract the global trend of de-linking Yoga from Indianess (Shukla, 2018). In this regard, collaboration with these interdependent yet separate forms of tourism attraction is crucial.

For instance, there has been an increased interest in awareness-raising and research in the field of yoga thematic tourism. Yoga and wellness tourism can be defined as physiological, mental and spiritual. There is a broad range of Yoga schools, practices and aspirations in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga are among the best-known types (Kumar, 2017).

Similarly, Ayurveda tourism is one of the linchpins of India's wellness, health and medical tourism. Many scholars (Kumar, 2017; Venkat, 2010) have recognised interrelationships with these features. Kumar observed that:

people from all over the globe move towards India for Ayurveda, yoga and meditation in Rishikesh, Uttaranchal, which is practised for centuries (2017:2).

Collaboration between these connected activities will be a keystone of India's post-COVID-strategy. It will be important to work on different characteristics of each element to create synergy since, during times of crisis, Yoga and Ayurveda can still attract tourists by using online platforms. This will also be beneficial to keep the sector active—joint ventures, marketing and initiatives will build-up India's tourism much more efficiently than any uni-directional plans.

Conclusion

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has challenged nations and industries across the world. Unprecedented travel restrictions and stay-at-home and lockdown orders are exacerbating the world's greatest disruption since the Second World War. With worldwide travel restrictions impacting more than 90% of the world's inhabitants and widespread restrictions on large gatherings and social mobility, the tourism industry has been suffering since the first quarter of 2020, and the impact has surpassed all prediction models.

This has raised many concerns about the future of global tourism, including tourist behavioural changes, resilience and rebuilding, safety and security, hygiene issues, the future of international travel and the role of domestic tourism in resilience. This pandemic has transformed the entire world and created a new normal. In this regard, it is the time for developing strategies for recovery and

rebuilding within the current atmosphere of uncertainty.

Domestic tourism is predicted to be the most successful survivor of this crisis and is expected to be the preferred choice for tourists at least for the next few years. This will include tourism in India. Therefore, domestic tourism activities will be reformed or transformed to build from scratch post-pandemic. The MoT (2019) statistics point out the importance of religious tourism activities, which directly or indirectly contribute form a major share of domestic tourism. Therefore, this paper presents religious tourism as one of the predominant post-COVID strategies for Indian tourism.

Operationalised through Faulkner's (2001) crisis management model, this exploratory qualitative study proposes several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study could be considered pioneering by presenting religious tourism as a post-COVID-19 strategy. Therefore, it widens the present literature about religious tourism and crisis management. Moreover, as research focused on future strategy, it provides numerous ideas for government bodies, industries, other stakeholders and society (see Table 1)

The study recommends that future research needs to focus on practical collaborative projects by incorporating various forms of tourism to create strategic synergy. It further highlights the importance of post-crisis marketing studies to evaluate reach and effectiveness. Finally, it is vital to recognise the potential limitations of this research, primarily due to the ongoing uncertainty of the national and global context. India is still at the crisis stage of the process, and it is impossible to predict any outcomes reliably; however, COVID-19 presents the tourism sector, policymakers and governing bodies with a definite hint regarding the effects of various transformations. The target is to now recover from this global catastrophe in order to uplift and transform global tourism.

Table 1: Study Recommendations

Areas of interest	Recommendations
Boost domestic tourism	Encourage domestic tourism by exploiting the Indian cultural dimensions of religiousness. This is a primary step before / during / after the pandemic.
Exploit the tendency for staycations and micro-holidays	For Indian religious tourism, the main advantages is the vast number attractions; the majority of them are still unrecognised, yet they have great potential to become top attractors. Moreover, these local hidden germs of religious sites are less crowded and move tourists away from the major cities (for instance, the sacred groves of Kerala). This should be exploited for making staycations and micro-holidays through strategic promotional activities.
Reform existing projects	<p>The Swadesh Darshan Scheme (SDS) and the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) are initiatives established by the government of India to recognise and cultivate tourist destinations on the pillars of high tourism visits, competitiveness and sustainability to enrich religious visitor experiences. These schemes need to be reformed by including the COVID-free zones, to project these destinations as a safe place to travel.</p> <p>The selection of new development sites under the SDS and PRASAD schemes is a continuous process according to the availability of resources and compliance with the guidelines for the scheme. Therefore, development of the initiatives should focus on sites inside the green zones, which claim to be COVID-free.</p>
Collaboration	Collaboration with connected popular attractions will be the key to religious tourism development. This is important due to the secularisation of Yoga and Ayurveda and their delinking from their Hindu principles. Therefore, it is vital to protect these attractions and showcase their its inseparability through logical scientific evidence to attract global approval and appreciation.
Stakeholders	India is a land with numerous religions, primarily Hinduism, Isalm, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Sufism, with large pilgrimage centres in various regions of India. Pilgrimage tourism is explicitly or implicitly motivated by religious beliefs. Religion and spirituality are increasing motivations for travel, with significant tourism attractions developing mainly due to their associations to holy sites, religious Gurus and events like festivals and Melas. India's domestic tourism development primarily depends on pilgrimage / spiritual / religious / sacred tourism. To maximise this capacity, the selected pilgrimage destinations require comprehensive development in cooperation with other stakeholders.
Community partnership	Religious tourist attractions differ from traditional holiday or leisure destinations, explicitly targeting the segment with a tendency to travel and spend. Developing a religious tourism product includes creating community participation at the destination, especially after the pandemic.

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